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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between student conceptual level and attitudes toward four methods course components: theory, content, method, and experience working with children. Research findings have indicated that a match between student conceptual level and course instructional mode result in significant improvement in student attitudes toward the education course. Student conceptual level appears to be a factor that can be used to determine the needs of preservice teachers. The findings of this study confirm that conceptual level is closely related to student perceptions of methods course components. Students operating at or near a low conceptual level responded more favorably to a well organized, clear, and consistent course structure. Students with a higher conceptual level were open to course concepts in a more open, less structured format. The implications of these findings for teacher education are discussed. (JD)

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CONCEPTUAL LEVEL AS A FACTOR AFFECTING STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS METHODS COURSE COMPONENTS

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Conceptual Level as a Factor Affecting Student Attitudes Towards Methods Course Components

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PROBLEM

Many education methods courses have characteristically been designed to incorporate theory, content and methods as a basis for teacher preparation. Field experiences are often included to reinforce education concepts. In order to provide the best possible training for preservice teachers, methods courses must be designed to meet students' needs.

Two factors, age and former experiences with children were found to significantly affect preservice teacher attitudes toward components of a methods course in which thirty percent of the course time was designated for experiences with children (Donofrio, Van Cleaf and Martin, 1980). A second study compared attitudes of the aforementioned group to a group of students enrolled in a methods course with only five percent of the course time designated for experiences with children (Van Cleaf, Schroder and Frataccia, 1980). Between group comparisions revealed significant differences. Additionally, student age and prior experience were not found to be consistent in their predictive reliability.

An accumulated body of empirical data indicates that Conceptual Systems Theory (Harvey, Hunt and Schroder, 1961) may have application in assessing needs of students enrolled in college methods courses. Santmire (1979) stated that a match between student conceptual level (CL) and course instructional mode resulted in significant improvement in student attitudes toward

the education course. Student CL appears to be a factor that can be used to determine the needs of preservice teachers.

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between student conceptual level and attitudes toward four methods course components (theory, content, method, and experiences working with children).

PROCEDURES

The Paragraph Completion Method, a semi-projective test, was administered to students (N=30) at the beginning of a summer elementary social studies methods course. At the end of the summer session the students were asked to indicate their perceptions about the four course components (theory, content, methods and experiences with children). A five point Likert-type scale was used. The scale ranged from very unimportant to very important.

The population consisted of college seniors as well as students returning to college for elementary certification. Students ranged in age from twenty-one to thirty-seven.

CL's were obtained by scoring student responses to the sentence completion measure. Two conceptual level groups were identified: CL-I - Students with a CL of 1.0, 1.2, or 1.4, and; CL-II - Students with a CL of 1.6, 1.8, 2.0, and 2.2.

Mean scores for student responses to the Likert attitudinal scale for the four course components were then computed by CL group. A t-test procedure was then used to compare mean scores of CL-I and CL-II for each course component.

RESULTS

The students' conceptual levels were quite low. 18 students were operating near Stage I, and 12 students near Stage II. The highest CL obtained was 2.2 (see Table 1).

Insert Tables about here

Both groups ranked method as the most important of the four methods course components. For each group method was followed in importance by experiences with children. CL-I students ranked content third and theory fourth. CL-II student mean scores for content and theory were similar, $\bar{X}$=3.67 (see Table 2).

Statistical comparisions of the two CL groups revealed significant differences between the groups in two areas; methods ($t=2.02$, $df=28$, $p=.05$) and content ($t=2.36$, $df=28$, $p < .05$). Group I mean scores for methods and content were significantly higher (see Table 3).

IMPLICATIONS

It appears that conceptual level is closely related to student perceptions of methods course components. An understanding of methods students' CL can provide information which can then be used to make methods courses more meaningful and educationally appropriate. Teacher educators responsible for methods course design and instruction could then construct experiences for different portions of the population within a given course.

Students operating at or near Stage I (CL=1.0) respond more favorably to a well organized structure, a structure that is both clear and consistent. An environment which is either too conforming or one in which expectations are unclear will inhibit continued development. Students operating at or near Stage II (CL=2.0) are beginning to develop deminsions of the self. Fewer normative pressures and opportunities to develop independence facilitate development for individuals at this stage (Hunt, 1966). Students with a

lower CL might be provided initial experiences with children under more direct supervision. Students with a higher CL could, for instance, be provided experiences which allow them to apply course concepts in a more open, less structured, format.

Student age, prior experiences with children, and conceptual level appear to present a profile that can be used to modify instruction in such a way as to meet individual student needs. Additional research can continue to examine the relationship between student profiles, specific methodological approaches and emphasis placed on the four course components (theory, content, methods and experiences with children).

Table 1

Frequencies by Conceptual Level

Conceptual Level		N
CL-I	1.0	7
	1.2	5
	1.4	6
Total		18
CL-II	1.6	6
	1.8	3
	2.0	2
	2.2	1
Total		12

Table 2

Rankings of Four Methods Course Components by Conceptul Level

Course Component	CL-I (N=18) $\bar{X}$	CL-I (N=18) Ranking	CL-II (N=12) $\bar{X}$	CL-II (N=12) Ranking
Methods	4.83	1	4.5	1
Experiences with Children	4.56	2	4.42	2
Content	4.39	3	3.67	3
Theory	4.06	4	3.67	3

Table 3

CL-I vs CL-II Differences for
Four Methods Course Components

Course Component	t	df	p
Methods	2.02	28	.05 *
Experiences with Children	.50	28	.62
Content	2.36	28	.03 *
Theory	1.32	28	.20

*Significant at $p \leq .05$

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